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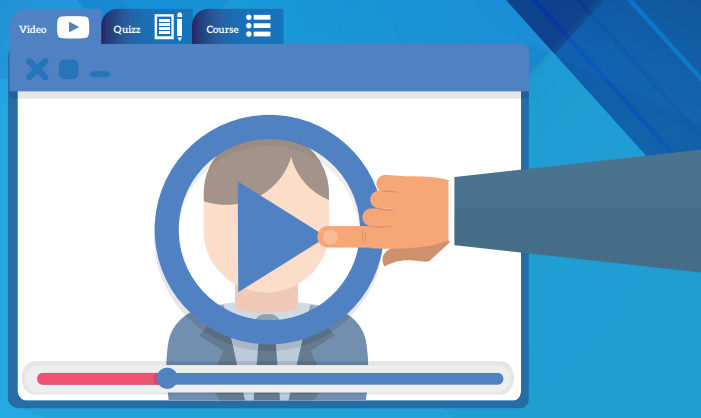
The Role of Materials in Foreign Language Learning



Abstract

Materials and resources are considered demanding and time consuming items inside language learning process. Context and learners' profile constitute the first step to understand the social, cultural, economic and educational features surrounded learners' life and learning background. The nature of the syllabus implies teachers to comprehend deeply what learners know according to the given findings in the context and learners' profile. The material used by the learners would be closely connected to selected approach to be applied during process. The perceived needs and evaluation come at the end of this discussion because the connection with its own nature. Beyond doubts there is a symbiotic relationship between the needs at the beginning of a course and the evaluation at the end of the school year.

Keywords: material, resources, learners, context, profile, evaluation, learning approach, task.

Resumen

los recursos y materiales son considerados elementos que requieren mucho tiempo y son difíciles de producir dentro del proceso de aprendizaje de un idioma. El contexto y el perfil de los educandos constituyen el primer paso para entender las características sociales, culturales, económicas y educativas que rodean la vida y los pre- saberes de los estudiantes. La naturaleza del plan de estudios implica que los profesores comprendan profundamente lo que saben los alumnos de acuerdo con las conclusiones que se recogen en el contexto y el perfil de los alumnos. El material utilizado por los alumnos estaría estrechamente relacionado con el enfoque seleccionado para ser aplicado durante el proceso. Las necesidades percibidas y la evaluación se presentan al final de esta discusión por la conexión existente con su propia naturaleza. Más allá de las dudas existe una relación simbiótica entre las necesidades al comienzo de un curso y la evaluación al final del año escolar.

Palabras claves: material, recursos, alumnos, contexto, perfil, evaluación, enfoque de aprendizaje, tareas.

Currently materials and resources are considered demanding and time consuming items to be built inside a language learning process, however they also are key components to assure learners' success in controlling the target language. The present paper intents to describe and to discuss some expected elements to bear in mind when designing materials or resources for class sessions based on my own experience as English teacher in a rural public school in Lorica – Córdoba.

Context: Today's world is characterized by intercultural communication, the growing pace of scientific and technological advances and by the globalization processes. These suggest the need for a common language that allows the international community to access this new globalized world. Furthermore, it is also important to reach high quality training for media and communication that allow the integration of conceptual basis for the acquisition of universal knowledge. Thus the design of learning materials with a great conceptual, pedagogical and creative richness is required, also the use of interactive systems, and extensive networks databases constantly updated. In these processes is important to understand and use other languages, mainly the international language most used in technologies: English. Thus, students' environment is permeated by the trends of globalization in cultural, social and economic fields; due to this, the learning of the foreign language such as English becomes a prior element for the learners to interact in all these different areas. Likewise, school must generate the spaces for training their students through the updating of curricula, the review of area plans, teachers' ongoing training and the increasing of the allotted time for the English teaching and learning.

Learning materials aim to promote the acquisition of knowledge and competences by the learners, that is why the design of these ones is considered a very demanding activity, however any teacher especially language teachers should try to develop his/her own materials which respond to the context and language learners needs. In the case of context, it is taken into account as a main element in learning a language because it can help the learners to have a more comprehensive grasp of the language and then to assimilate it easier. Even more social context and local culture may define the characteristics of the interactions and foreign language role inside the learning process; in this sense, language teachers must develop a real analysis of these aspects when starting to design learning language materials. In regards to the above mentioned, Kramsch and Sullivan (1996) state plainly that 'local culture' in TEFL should be taught. So the present kit of learning language material is conceived as a contextual piece of work that not only search for the acquisition of the target language 'English', but also as a tool which promotes the highlighting of the regional context and culture.

Although we have reached to the conclusion that context and local culture are important factors when creating our own-learning materials, it is required to have a clear idea of what a context is and its role in language learning. From the perspective of Brown,E.; Börner, D.; Sharples, M.; Glahn, G.; De Jong, T.; & Specht M (no date) Context can be defined as the formal or informal setting in which a situation occurs. It can include many

aspects and dimensions, such as location, time, personal and social activity, resources, and goals and task structures of groups and individuals.

The above said indicates that the different scenarios for teaching a foreign language imply not only to have knowledge about the internal dispositions, the personal characteristics, and the aptitude to learning, but also the diverse environments in which the learners are immerse with the aim to design a learning material that gives responds to the learners' objectives and expectations about the target language.

Contextualized learning provides learners a warm and familiar picture that may be increase self-confidence and give them a confortable path to the safe harbor of learning. In accordance to this, Researchers such as Firth and Wagner (1997) contended that the best predictive models of SLA consider the interaction of social activity and psycholinguistic elements. Bearing in mind that context plays a key role in acquiring a foreign language, the material designed should respond to those contextual requirements. A contextualized language learning material kit could be organized around familiar topics and regional issues that allow the learners to recognize themselves as interactive agents in the learning process. Moreover, it is thought to be applied a as resource in mobile context inside the region; being useful and appropriate in different rural public schools' environments.

Learners' profile: 11th grades at Eugenio Sanchez Cardenas, a rural public school in Lorica-Cordoba region, are groups between 25 to 35 students per course. They are students whose aged range between 15 to 19 years old. They have been learning English since they were in first grade of primary education as a government's educational policy; it is supported by bilingualism law 1651 of 2013 which modifies the general education law, ley 115 de 1994 that establishes in its article 22 literal l that every single student in Colombia has to acquire of the elements of speaking and reading at least in a foreign language.

The students at Eugenio Sánchez Cárdenas School receive two hours of English classes per week, so the module is designed to fulfill and to cover with the allotted time. In general terms students of 11th grade show low interest toward learning English and they seem to be disrupted most of the time; for this reason the designed material looks for catching their attention and interest. Another characteristic is that the majority of the groups in this school are heterogeneous; it means that mixed ability is plainly observed. Noticing that mixed ability groups are recurrent in the school, the learners' levels are uneven, and then the designed materials owe to be inclusive and varied in its session activities and tasks As I argue above, designing materials for language classes is a demanding activity in any context we are teaching in, moreover if we bear in mind that even in monolingual classes we find "mixed ability" or heterogeneous students, I could say that I agree in a great deal with Ur's statements because we need then to adapt, extend or change the given tasks in the course of the session(s) to supply students' needs according with their language level. The "mixed ability" theory is still valid in the language teaching classroom although it has taken the body of a more constructivist concept the

multiple intelligences theory. Howard Gardner (2006) proposed nine different and autonomous intelligence capacities that result in many different ways of knowing, understanding and learning about our world. The above said imply language teachers to identify, explore and take advantages of students' different learning styles during their classes. On the other hand the success or not in SLA not only depends on how much a teacher knows about the heterogeneous class he has, but the ways he/she uses to organize, direct and guide the group work to promote meaningful learning among them. Penny Ur (1996) states the fact that the teacher is very much less able to attend to every individual in the class means that in order for the class to function well the students themselves must help by the teaching each other and working together: peer teaching and collaboration are likely to be fairly common, fostering an atmosphere of co-operation. Whilst the scenario discussed directly above occurs, then we can say undoubtedly that mixed-ability groups can get better results in learning a new language when teachers prepare and apply materials which include activities that can be easily graded and manipulated for the whole class.

The Colombian government has promoted the bilingualism in the entire country as a way of inserting the nation in the international landscape; the national standards of competences in foreign language 'English' 2006 represent the benchmark to be followed by every single English teacher to set their teaching and learning goals. According to the common European framework, the standards state that all the Colombian students would reach the B1 level at the end of the 11th grade [1]; however, Eugenio Sanchez Cardenas students do not still match with this stipulated level; that is why a proposed kit of language learning material should be developed with the aim to help the learners to consolidate their communicative language competences and then to increase their performance in the target language.

The nature of the syllabus: Teaching approaches and methods have been changing rapidly through the time, nevertheless in the last thirty years CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) has taken the prevalent place in the language learning world. According to Bax (2003) who states that the communicative language teaching (CLT) has been a dominate approach for quite some time and it has served the language teaching profession for many years. Under this conception, most of the syllabus and of course the material designed to carry out the learning language process are based under this wide umbrella, but before starting to discuss the status of CLT approach and its method in the proposed material, it is imperative to clarify what CLT is. The language teaching and applied linguistic dictionary define CLT as an APPROACH to foreign or second language teaching which emphasizes that the goal of language learning is COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE and which seeks to make meaningful communication and language use a focus of all classroom activities. Teachers who decide to teach and create his/her materials based on its paradigms, need to determine clearly the implications of language use to communicate, authentic and meaningful communication in class

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activities, the improvement of fluency and accuracy in the learners, the integrations of the four language skills and the role of error and trial when producing any kit of material.

Although any proposed module is considered to be another son of the huge CLT approach, I would like to be more specific about the nature of its syllabus and enter to the method in which it is supported, of course is the real representation of the teaching plan inside the classroom. Nunan (2003) defines a language teaching method as a single set of procedures that teachers are to follow in the classroom. Methods are usually based on a set of beliefs about the nature of language and learning.

Nunan's words reveal a closed relationship between language method and learning materials which at last operationalized the procedures raised in the chosen method. In the case of the current module, it is conceived under task based learning principles due to the fact that the activities contain rich but comprehensive input of real spoken and written language in use, besides the language is use to things; it means to transform the given input to produce a coherent output. All the above explained unveil a strong trend towards procedural syllabus, Prabhu (1983) claimed that The only form of syllabus which is compatible with and can support communicational teaching seems to be a purely procedural one- which lists in more or less detail, the types of tasks to be attempted in the classroom and suggests an order of complexity for tasks of the same kind. In agreement to this, Willis (1996) express task-based learning that combines the best of Communicative Language Teaching bases with a focus on language form.

The proposed kit of materials enhances learners to learn by doing themselves and allowing them to manipulate, work on their own and generate a language response about the given task. Et, al (1983) holds that a task is an activity where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome; there must be evidence of the above mentioned in the proposed module because it is structured responding to Willis task cycle in which the learners face four phases, going from the pre-task to post-task and starting again.

Activating knowledge (pre-task) attempts to get the learners familiar with the suggested topic and structure, in this they have to answer questions or read texts related to their own life. Also the pre-task phase promotes vocabulary practice in context to use the new words to carry out the future tasks.

Conversation (task-preparation) seeks to prepare the learners to be ready to work independently; in this phase the learners practice the conversation with the teacher to trial pronunciation and correct the mistakes, then they work in pair and finally they are chosen at random to perform it.

Writing and speaking (task-realization) pursuit learners' application of the knowledge and to evidence their competences in the productive skills; in this phase the learners manipulate and transform the input (vocabulary, verbs time, structures, idioms, etc.) to complete a proposed language task.

Consolidating activity and communicative task (post-task) tends to ensure learners

learning, to feedback on their performance, to assess their knowledge and to evaluate the lesson to start again. In this phase, learners face a task in which the four skills are integrated, so they would be able to put into practice what they have learnt in a real and meaningful way.

Although grammar is included in the module with a chart called "grammar focus", the explanation of this is not given directly but it is taught inductive, so that the learners get aware of the language rules by experience the language in use. The purpose of this grammar chart is to have a referential framework of structures examples which enable the learners to discover the grammar rules by themselves based on familiar examples of their daily life environment.

Material used by the learner: As the module is thought under the task based learning method, it becomes a very handy material to be used by the learners. It is conceived and organized as a mixture between a studentbook and a workbook integrated in one to facilitate learners' language acquisition and language use at the same time. The social-educative context and the learners profile demand to think about a kit of learning materials that were easy to understand, handleable by the learners and foster learners' independent work; because of the short allotted class time, independent work become a key factor to assure learners success in the target language. For this reason, the module should possess activities to be done by the learners outside the classes to strength the language learning and to keep the learners' in touch with the language itself.

The perceived need: learners at Eugenio Sanchez Cardenas' school possess a very reduced background in learning English. They rarely study English as a regular subject during primary because the teachers in charge of carrying out the teaching process in this level were not trained in the foreign language, so they did not dare to teach even the Basic English structures. Unfortunately, many teachers are not provided with specialized training in how to meet the needs of ELLs (Menken & Atunez, 2001). The lack of enough English language basis during the earliest levels of learning have triggered that learners reach high school with an inappropriate level of English competences that do not allowed them to satisfy the standards requirements. So learners do not manage the needed vocabulary, the Elementary English structures and verbs time utter something in the target language. That is the reason why the proposed piece of work establishes a scaffolding set of tasks to help the learners to return to the English language learning path and begin to consolidate his/her communicative competence.

Learning evaluation: The designed kit of learning material which we have been discussing in here is undoubtedly enrolled in task based learning; that is why, the aim to be reached has to respond to this method criteria. So the principle of task based assessment involves a kind of communicative performance that the learners need to carry out which answer to the required task. Likewise, there is another principle that teachers have to take into account; that is to balance teaching and assessment in harmonic relationship because task based learning's tenets let us know that every teaching task can be used

as an assessing one and vice versa. That is to say that there is a reciprocal and mutual symbiosis that language teachers have to take into account to cement the established method. In the case of the proposed module I suggest that any teacher who applies this material can use every single activity as a teaching and assessing one, due to the fact that it must be created in such way that each activity promotes language practice and language manipulation at the same time, for instance the activating knowledge phase which main purpose is to get the learners familiar and warm towards the new topic, can easily be used to assess at least the previous language competences of the learners.

Even though the module's activities have a great potential as evaluating sources, to reinforce the process of English language acquisition in the learners, I propose a rubric phase at the end of each unit. This rubric component attempts to evaluated learners development and progress in English learning. Language researchers are agree to define rubric as an assessment tool teachers can use to assess projects, students groups, or individual students; students can use the rubric for self-assessment as individuals, in groups, and for peer assessment.

The established rubric for the proposed module is divided in some stages; in first place presents a descriptive chart in which learners can review the unit goals and decide what level of competence have reached. Then, the learners face some problem solving exercises in which the learners need to manipulate the input to solve the given task; most of these activities involve knowledge about the studied structures with the aim of corroborate how much control the learner have over the topics. Finally the rubric ends with a writing-speaking task to provide communicative language practice in context.

Definitely to design, organize and apply a own produce learning material demands teacher to know deeply their whole teaching context, however these kind of material provide the best tool to support and complement teachers' work. So I could say that if a teacher is able to develop his/her own learning materials, he/she is one step ahead in the success of improving learners language learning.

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